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ABSTRACT

This paper narrates the life of Philip Vickers Fithian, a northern tutor on a southern plantation prior to the American Revolution. Fithian's life is described from the time he was born in 1747, through his years at the College of New Jersey, renamed Princeton College in 1896 and later Princeton University, until he graduated in 1772, and until his death from exposure at the battle of White Plains, New York, in 1776. The paper recounts the times he spent as a tutor to the eight Carter children on a Virginia plantation near Williamsburg. The journals and letters Fithian wrote remained unpublished until 1900 when they were published for the first time. The value of Philip Fithian's journal and letters lies in their graphic and intimate portrait of Virginian plantation life, culture, and education. (EH)

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Philip Vickers Fithian (1747-1776), a Princeton Tutor on a Virginia Plantation

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Philip Vickers Fithian was a northern tutor on a southern plantation just before the American Revolution. His journal and letters written during 1773-74 and kept at Princeton University Library, New Jersey, provide an accurate picture of Virginia life, education, and manners before the Revolution. Because Fithian was a tutor on the Carter plantation, Nomini Hall, Westmoreland County, Va., his journal and letters are of special interest. They offer an in intimate description of a plantation tutor's duties as well as glimpses of life and education in the colonial South.

Philip Fithian was born in Greenwich, Cumberland County, New Jersey, on December 19, 1747. His forebears three generations back in 1640 had emigrated from England. Little is known of Fithian's early education before his admission in 1770 at age 23 to the junior class of the College of New Jersey, renamed Princeton College in 1896 and later Princeton University.

The College of New Jersey was chartered in 1746 and opened in 1747 by the "New Light" (evangelical) Presbyterians in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Its second president was Aaron Burr. The College was moved to Princeton, New Jersey, in 1756, was occupied by British forces in the American Revolution, its buildings badly damaged, and then rebuilt under President John Witherspoon.

Dr. John Witherspoon, appointed president in 1768, two years before Fithian's admission, was a leading and well known Presbyterian minister. He was later a delegate from New Jersey to the Continental Congress and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Because of his missionary zeal as president of the College of New Jersey, he influenced many students studying for the ministry to go out to preach and teach in frontier communities, particularly in the southern colonies

Fithian graduated from the college at Princeton in September 1772. The sudden death of his parents earlier that year had kept him from additional study at Princeton to prepare for the ministry. He went back to his hometown of Greenwich and studied Hebrew under Reverend Andrew Hunter. He also studied theology at nearby Deerfield.

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It was Reverend Hunter's son, then at Princeton, who wrote to Fithian that he heard that President John Witherspoon had been asked to find someone to fill a position as tutor on a Virginia plantation. Needing to earn money before he could complete his studies for the ministry, Fithian went to Princeton to see President Witherspoon and listened to him read the letter from Colonel Carter describing the position.

A tutor was needed to teach the eight Carter children. The three boys from ages 5 to 17 were "to study the English language carefully & to be instructed in Latin & Greek." The five daughters were to be taught English. The tutor was to receive £60 in currency, room and board, have the use of the library, a servant, and feed for his horse. Witherspoon advised Fithian to go, even if for only a short time. Fithian was apprehensive. His friends cast doubt on the idea, and Fithian wrote to President Witherspoon to try to get a graduating senior to go in his stead. Fithian continued to worry through August and September 1773. Finally, with misgivings, he decided to accept the position and left on horseback for Virginia in mid October. Just before he left, he wrote in his journal: "Rode & took Leave of all my Relations--how hard is it at last? My heart misgives, is reluctant, in spite of me; But I must away! Protect me merciful Heaven."

Fithian's journal and letters tell that he rode horseback 260 miles in seven days and that he spent on his trip a total of £3.6 shillings and 5 pence. He reached Nomini Hall, the mansion on the Carter Plantation, in Westmoreland County, Virginia, on Thursday, October 29, 1773.

On Monday, November 1, 1773, he taught his eight pupils for the first time. The eldest son read the works of Salust, a Roman historian and politician, and studied Latin grammar. The middle son read and wrote English and did subtraction. The youngest son read and wrote English and did arithmetic sums. The eldest daughter read the *Spectator* papers, wrote a composition, and did her arithmetic. Three of the other girls went over their spelling and did some writing. The smallest girl was just beginning to learn the alphabet.

Fithian was agreeably surprised during his stay at Nomini Hall. Instead of the revelry and riotous living he had imagined, he found refinement, elegance, and culture. Robert Carter III was the descendant of a wealthy and influential Tidewater family. He was the grandson of the original immigrant, John Carter, who left England for Virginia in 1649, nine

years after Fithian's own forebears had reached the new world. "King Carter," as he was sometimes called, had acquired 13,500 acres and had become a successful planter and businessman. His son had expanded the family fortune, had obtained 330,000 acres, which he divided among his sons. He left Robert Carter III at age 21 the master of 70,000 acres.

Robert Carter had been sent at the young age of nine to William and Mary College in Williamsburg. From there Carter made his first trip to England, where he spent two years studying and gaining refinement, as his father and grandfather had done before him. Returning to Virginia in 1751, he married a 16-year-old girl of his own station whom he met on a trip to Maryland. She bore her husband 17 children. Those who lived she carefully trained during their early years.

Robert Carter III led a busy life at Nomini Hall. He managed his 70,000 acres, consisting of a dozen plantations. He grew tobacco and grain. He also rented large parts of his estate to others, some on money rental for fixed periods, some to white sharecroppers, supplying them with land, tools, and seeds. The sharecroppers returned to him a portion of the crops in payment.

Besides being a planter and a landlord, Robert Carter III was a manufacturer. He operated textile factories, salt works, smiths' shops, iron works, grain mills, and bakeries to fill his own needs and those of his neighbors. He owned ships which carried his supplies and those of other nearby planters on the Virginia rivers. He was also something of a banker and lent credit to others. At one time he owned over 500 slaves and employed many stewards, overseers, clerks, skilled craftsmen, and other workers.

Not all plantation owners owned so much as Robert Carter III did, but many Southerners of his station had a deep sense of obligation to society. They were justices in county courts, served as sheriffs, colonels of militia (Carter was a colonel of militia), and acted as vestrymen and church wardens in their parishes. Carter was in a real sense the protector, father, physician, and court of last resort for all people on the plantation. At 23 he was a member of the Governor's Council and spent a good part of each year attending the General Court in the capital at Williamsburg.

At home at Nomini Hall Carter read, practiced music, and took part in social life. Among the musical instruments at Nomini Hall were the

harpsichord, harmonica, guitar, violin, German flute, and an organ specially built in England and transported for him to Virginia.

Fithian appreciated the refinement, culture, and benevolence of the ruling class that Carter represented. But Fithian was critical of slavery. Learning of the food allowance for slaves and hearing of harsh treatment of those considered to be difficult, he wrote of their owners, "Good God! Are these Christians?" Some overseers he called "bloody," and he believed that black slaves from Africa were less economical than free white tenant farmers would be. To note the graceful life of the upper class in the South is to look at only part of a large picture. The colonial South had well defined social classes. At the base of these were the slaves who provided the essential labor of the entire society.

Unlike the New England Puritans, the southern aristocracy reflected the conservative outlook of the English upper class and the Anglican (or Established) Church. While middle class Puritans came mainly for religious liberty, upper class Anglicans came primarily for the chance to gain large wealth.

The economic foundation of the South was laid in 1612 when John Rolfe successfully grew and processed tobacco. This money-making crop was much more important from the point of view of the Southerners' interests than rice and indigo. But tobacco took a heavy drain of essential minerals from the soil and needed more and more growing land and more and more field labor.

While plantation owners provided the ingenuity and the initial capital, slaves did the essential hard work. In between were English white indentured servants from the working class who paid for their passage by seven years of work and then, except for a few who left the South, became tenant farmers or small landowners or craftsmen. Thus the social class structure arose naturally out of existing conditions. The pattern became fixed: black slaves, white farm workers in various social categories, and a small top layer of wealthy plantation owners like Carter whose rule was buttressed by the government and by the established Anglican Church.

Education in the South had some things in common with education in the North, particularly a philanthropic concern for religious literacy, economic usefulness, and social welfare. Apprenticeship training, going back for its inspiration to the English poor laws, was practiced in all the colonies.

In the South, apprenticeship opportunities were available for dependent white children, for orphan white children, and for some illegitimate mulatto or mixed-blooded children. Most slave children were brought up at home by illiterate parents and were quickly put to field work or other work they could perform. Some planters did establish schoolhouses in abandoned tobacco fields and hired teachers. A few Old Field Schools, as they were called, were for black slave children, but most Old Field Schools were for poorer white children. Old Field School pupils learned little more than the ABC's and Anglican catechism.

One philanthropic agency which provided organized education for religious purposes was the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, usually referred to simply as S.P.G. This missionary arm of the Anglican Church had been founded in England in 1701 by Thomas Bray, Church of England clergymen, for mission education work in the British colonies. But S.P.G. educational work in the American South was negligible.

Early attempts had been made to establish schools in Virginia using private donations. The Virginia Company had hoped to establish Henrico College in 1619 as a missionary school to convert the Indians to Anglican Christianity, but the college soon failed. An attempt by a clergyman, Patrick Copeland, to establish an East India Company school about the same time also failed. Some individuals did establish private free schools, similar to northern grammar schools, where the three R's, Latin, and religion were taught. Two outstanding examples of these relatively few private schools in Virginia included a school founded by planter Benjamin Symes in 1634. In his will Symes left the school an endowment of 299 acres of land and eight cows. In 1659 Dr. Thomas Eaton gave several hundred acres, buildings, slaves, and livestock for another school. The Symes and Eaton schools united in 1805 to form Hampton Academy, and in 1902 Hampton Academy became part of the Virginia public school system.

Basically, however, the southern aristocracy, like the British upper class, believed that education was a private, family matter. In New England the Calvinistic Puritan desire for religious literacy led to government requirement and support, as in the Massachusetts school laws of 1642 and 1647, which aimed at universal elementary and secondary education. But in the South the tradition of education as a private family matter was strong. Unlike the northern colonies, the southern colonial governments did not

provide educational schemes for the common people. For the southern plantation elites, mothers trained their children during the very early years, then private tutors like Philip Fithian were hired for the intermediate years, and a further finishing education was obtained either abroad in English or French university colleges or at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Fithian's position at the Carter house was one close to the family. Those who lived in Nomini Hall besides the family, included Fithian, servants, a housekeeper, a clerk, a dancing master, and a nurse. Some other plantation homes had fencing masters, tutors from abroad, and governesses from the continent hired chiefly for their knowledge of French and German languages. The southern plantation youth were exposed to a wide and liberal curriculum, which included classical literature, foreign languages, philosophy, dancing, fencing, and such practical subjects as surveying and law. The goal was not professional specialization but rather a gentlemanly education that aimed at character building.

Southern plantation owners had some of the largest libraries in all the colonies. One of Philip Fithian's jobs was to catalog Colonel Carter's library of more than 1,000 volumes, containing many classics and books on manners, gardening, medicine and surgery, surveying, engineering, law, commentaries on law, architecture, and a wide range of other cultural subjects.

Philip Vickers Fithian went to Virginia in late October 1773 with some fear and trepidation. Ten months later, in late summer 1774, when he left Nomini Hall, he carried with him a deep affection for the Carter children and family. He left to do further study to qualify as a Presbyterian minister. Besides, he had a sweetheart in Princeton to whom he wrote often.

On December 7, 1774, before the Presbytery of Philadelphia, Fithian took and passed his examination for the ministry and was licensed to preach. That winter he filled several vacant pulpits in western New Jersey. In the summer of 1775 he went as Presbyterian missionary to pioneer settlements in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and Pennsylvania. Soon after he married Elizabeth Beatty of Princeton.

At the outbreak of the American Revolution, Fithian enlisted as a chaplain in Heard's brigade of New Jersey militia. He was present at the battle of White Plains, New York. After suffering severe exposure during the

battle, he died near Fort Washington on October 8, 1776. He was twenty-nine years and ten months old.

For a century and a quarter Philip Vickers Fithian's manuscript journal and the letters he wrote to friends and relatives remained unpublished. His brother Enoch had copied these in bound volumes from the loose and various-sized sheets on which they had been written. These seven volumes in Enoch Fithian's handwriting remained at the Princeton University Library until 1900, when they were published for the first time. The last edition was published in 1945.

The value of Philip Fithian's journal and letters lies in their graphic and intimate portrait of Virginia plantation life, culture, and education. For a small proportion of the children of moderate-to-large plantation owners, the South offered education by tutors like Fithian that was genteel, cultured, and refined. For the children of white tradesmen and small land owners there were some private schools. For white indentured servants and sharecroppers there were relatively few Old Field Schools. Black slave children received practically no schooling. Northern education spread faster among a growing and rising middle class. Southern education, favoring as it did a proportionately smaller plantation aristocracy, had less educational impact on a smaller middle class, had little effect on poor whites, and no effect on the black slave majority.

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